

# My Soul Is a Woman

The Feminine in Islam

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CONTINUUM | NEW YORK

## — 1. Women and the Prophet —<sup>33</sup>

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*God has made dear to me from your world  
women and fragrance,  
and the joy of my eyes is in prayer.*

THIS SAYING OF THE PROPHET MUHAMMAD has been quoted a number of times now—so how is it possible that Islam should have come to be known as a religion with a negative view of women? And yet, over the centuries and under the influence of growing legalistic and ascetic movements, the woman in Islam has been relegated to a position far removed from the one she knew and enjoyed during the times of the Prophet and his successors.

This is why it is impossible to overestimate the role the Prophet's first wife, Khadija, played in defining the woman's place in Islam. This widowed merchant woman was already the mother of several children when she proposed marriage to her significantly younger co-worker Muhammad and subsequently bore his children. She was also the one who consoled and supported him after his first visions and auditions and who convinced him that the revelations he experienced in the cave at Mount Hira during his meditations were not of demonic but rather of divine origin. Khadija rightfully bears the honorary titles Mother of Believers and The Best of Women, *khair un-nisa* (the latter

still a favorite name for women). Modern Muslims, including a majority of women Muslims, repeatedly stress her essential contribution to the early history of Islam. She loved Muhammad deeply, and it was only after her death in 619 and after more than a quarter of a century together, that Muhammad gradually and over the course of time married a number of other women. Among his later wives was the very young 'A'isha, the daughter of his loyal friend Abu Bakr. The other women were widows or divorcees, some even former slaves. This fact became a very important argument in favor of the remarriage of widows among the modernists in India in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Their adherence to Hindu customs had made the Indian Muslims avoid remarriage for a long time, but how could they continue to act in such open contradiction to the Prophet's own example?

The later wives of the Prophet were subsequently given the title Mother of Believers as well. The Quran (Sura 24:30f.) admonished them "to cover their adornments," a regulation probably intended to differentiate them as respectable ladies from the lightly dressed women of the lower classes. Self-concealment dictated by modesty thus became an honor and was not seen as a sign of narrow constraint. It was only over the course of time and as a result of social changes that the rules of seclusion became stricter. In general, they were most rigorously applied to the *sayyid* ladies, which is to say, to those who could trace their descent back to the Prophet and his daughter Fatima. These women were subjected to many other taboos as well, at least in the Indo-Islamic world.

And yet in the early days of Islam women were actively involved in all aspects of social life and communal affairs. 'A'isha used to discuss problems arising from tradition with the Prophet's companions, and not only with them. Thus, we have her to thank for our knowledge of many details pertaining to Muhammad's private life. In 656 she actually

rode to battle herself in order to fight against 'Ali ibn Abi Talib and his partisans. The Sunnite tradition is proud of 'A'isha's activities, and people never tire of citing Muhammad's tender addresses to his young wife—*Kallimīni ya Humaira*, "Talk to me, you little reddish girl" (M I 1972, cf. M VII, p. 134)—for this young creature was always able to cheer him up. The mystics, of course, interpreted the Prophet's kind words as a direct appellation on the part of the lover to the Divine Spirit, with whom he would like to speak as if with a—male or female—beloved.

'A'isha is loathed in the Shi'ite tradition, however, for she was clearly opposed to 'Ali, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet, the man whom the Shi'ites honored as their first Imam, the true Leader of the Community. According to the Shi'ites, 'Ali should have been the legitimate successor of Muhammad after the latter's death, whereas 'A'isha's father Abu Bakr (who ruled from 632-634) had only usurped the caliphate. Complicating the matter even more was some bad blood between 'A'isha and 'Ali, who had made some negative remarks about her when she lost her necklace while on a journey and was brought back to the caravan by a young man. Doubts about her respectability, however, were soon dispelled by a revelation (Sura 24:11). 'A'isha's attitude toward 'Ali, whom she confronted in the already mentioned camel battle that took place in 656, increased the negative feelings of the Shi'ites against her. Her name, so frequently used as a woman's name in Sunnite circles, was never used among the Shi'ites. In the literature of the ultra-Shi'ite Nusairis 'A'isha is even compared to the yellowish cow, the sacrifice of which had been offered to Moses in Sura 2:67-72.

The Prophet had four daughters, and to have daughters was now no longer considered such a blemish as in pre-Islamic Arabia, where they used to bury alive what they considered to be superfluous girls. This immoral practice was clearly denounced in Sura 81:8. The new appreciation

of daughters was reflected in the fact that men now began adopting a new *kunya*, an agnomen or "honorary name." No longer only calling themselves Abu Talha, "Father of [the boy] Talha" or something along those lines, they now began to call themselves Abu Laila, Abu Raihana, "Father of [the girl] Laila," "Father of [the girl] Raihana," and so on. They did so because, as tradition has it, there is no shame attached to having a daughter. There is even a tradition that congratulates the father, but the reason is likely to surprise the modern reader: after all, a daughter can bring seven sons to the world.

Three of Muhammad's four daughters died during his lifetime: Zainab, Ruqayya, and Umm Kulthum. The latter two were initially married to sons of Abu Lahab, but they left their husbands when Abu Lahab became the Prophet's most bitter adversary (who was even cursed in the Quran [Sura 111]). 'Uthman ibn 'Affan, who was to become the third caliph (Muhammad's successor from 644 to 656), took them both to wife. Since a simultaneous marriage to sisters is forbidden, he married the one after the early death of the other, and this is why he carries the sobriquet *dhur n-nurain*, "the owner of the two lights." This is also why the combination of names *Osman Nuri* is still popular, especially in Turkey.

The youngest of the Prophet's daughters, Fatima, survived her father by a few months. She was married to Muhammad's cousin, 'Ali ibn Abi Talib, to whom she bore two sons. These boys became the Prophet's beloved grandsons; as tender legends and popular verse tell it, he used to spend many happy hours playing with them. Hasan, the elder of the two, died around 669, probably poisoned, while the younger, Husain, fell in 680 in the Battle of Kerbela against the army of the Umayyad caliph Yazid. The Umayyads had claimed the caliphate for themselves in 661 after the murder of 'Ali, and Husain tried to win power back for the house of the Prophet after Yazid, the second

Umayyad ruler, assumed the position. The tragedy of Ker-bela in Iraq, which took place on the tenth day of Muhar-ram (the first lunar month) had a profound effect on Shi'ite piety, and if the poetry of the Islamic peoples celebrate the Prophet's grandsons as glorious heroes, as the first of all martyrs, then Fatima was also granted a special position that can be described as nothing less than that of *mater dolorosa*. Although dead for almost fifty years before the demise of her second son, Fatima stands higher than all other people for the Shi'ites except Muhammad and 'Ali. Her sobriquets, including *Zahra*, The Radiant One; *Batul*, Virgin; *Kaniz*, Maiden; *Ma'suma*, Shielded from Sin, and many others are still very popular names for girls among Shi'ite communities. Moreover, not only is she the intercessor for all who weep for her son Husain, but, in the realm of mystical speculation, she is also the *umm abihā*, "her father's mother."

Story after story is told about Fatima. Those that dwell upon the poverty she endured particularly aroused the fantasy of the pious, for whom she was, in fact, the actual Queen of Mankind. One literary genre known as "Fatima's Dowry" (*Jihaznama-i Fatima*) enumerates all the humble trifles her father was able to give her for her dowry, her generosity toward the poor (even when her own family went hungry), her own sons' want of clothing—and all of this is related and embellished in ever-new ways, so that Fatima has come to be a role model for Muslim girls. In fact, in the Middle Ages there was even a sect that passed the family's entire fortune on to their daughters as inheritance—and all in honor of Fatima. Her veneration is also great in the Sunni world. Whether we read Muhammad Iqbal's (1877-1938) homage to Fatima in his 1917 Persian epic *Rumuz-i be-khudī* (Mysteries of Selflessness) (a book, by the way, that leaves no doubt whatsoever about his Sunni attitudes), or whether we read 'Alī Shari'ati's "Fatima is

Fatima," which appeared at the time of the Islamic revolution in Iran—all we hear is moving words of praise for this most respected and most virtuous Muslim woman. Only a person descended from her two sons can claim to be a *sayyid*, for this right does not extend to the offspring of 'Alī's other children from other wives.

Most people would probably agree with Sana'i (d. 1131 in Ghazna, today's Afghanistan), who sings:

The world is full of women,  
yet where is there a woman like Fatima,  
the best of women?

for the honorary name The Best of Women, *khair un-nisa*, was later granted not only to Khadija but to her youngest daughter as well.

Among the circles of mystics there were also those who considered the masculine name *Fatir* an appropriate "divine name" for Fatima.

Sources tell of numerous women in the Prophet's close proximity. Several of them emigrated with their families to Abyssinia in the early years of Islam, while others, like Umm 'Atiya, accompanied Muhammad and his army into a number of battles and cared for the wounded. It was also understood, of course, that they should participate in the prayer service in the mosque, for one *hadith* says: "Do not prevent the handmaidens of God from entering the places in which He is worshiped." Even the second caliph, Omar ibn al-Khattab (ruled 634-644), had to adopt this tradition, albeit not very happily. This ruler was known for his severity and justice and ought to have been more favorably inclined toward women. After all, his sister had already converted to Islam while he was still an apparently irreconcilable opponent of the Prophet. And yet, while intending to kill her during her recitation of Quranic revelations, he was so moved by the words that he immediately accepted Islam



and subsequently became the most zealous defender of the faith. Even Rumi tells extensively of this conversion in his prose work *Fihī ma fihī*.

Some of Muhammad's other female descendants are also known for their piety. One of them, Sayyida Nafisa, is particularly worthy of mention: a great-granddaughter of the Prophet, she married the son of the sixth imam, Ja'far as-Sadiq (d. 765), and went to Cairo with her cousin Sakina. There she soon became known for her ascetic piety. The historian Ibn Khallikan reports in his biography that even Imam Shafi'i, the founder of one of the four orthodox schools of law, is supposed to have said his prayers with her. Miracles naturally accompanied her wherever she went. According to one, the water she had used for her ritual ablutions is supposed to have healed a lame Jewess. When Nafisa died in 208/824, a mausoleum was built in her memory, and it has remained a popular pilgrim's destination to this day. In the Middle Ages, primarily during the period of the Mamelukes, the sultans celebrated her birthday in great style in the Citadelle of Cairo.

From the very beginning, the Prophet's saying quoted at the beginning of this chapter as well as his numerous marriages aroused the disapproval of Christian theologians—and not only theologians! How could a man who claimed to be the Prophet so abandon himself to the world of sensuality? This idea was simply abhorrent to the Christian ideal of chastity, to the ideal of celibacy that from early times onward was so deeply rooted in the church. The Muslim, however, will see no backsliding in this. Rather, he sees it as an expression of the joy one can find in the world of the senses, which is part of God's creation.

An Indo-Muslim interpretation of the Prophet's saying about "women" and one that derives from the great Delhi saint Nizamuddin Auliya maintains that the word "women" refers here very specifically to 'A'isha, whereas "the joy of my eyes" is said to be a reference to Fatima, who was

absorbed in prayer at the time ("and the joy of my eyes [i.e., Fatima] is at prayer"). This seems a bit farfetched, and we are more easily tempted to credit Ibn 'Arabi's interpretation, according to which the Prophet didn't love women for natural reasons—oh no, "he loved them because God made them lovable." Most important, however, is the reference to fragrance, frequently associated with the feminine element on the one hand and with holiness on the other. As the single masculine concept in Arabic, the word "fragrance" in this saying is inserted between the two feminine nouns "women" and "prayer." This observation was enough to provide the Sufis with never-ending food for thought concerning this mysterious relation.

### — 3. Women in the Quran and in the Tradition —

THE QURAN SPEAKS of "pious and believing women," *mumminat*, *muslimat*, and even mentions them in the same breath with pious and believing men; moreover, these women are expected to perform the same religious duties as the men are. There is only one negative female figure in the Quran, and she is the wife of Abu Lahab, Muhammad's archenemy. She is mentioned briefly in Sura 111, where she is called "the bearer of faggots." She wears a fiber halter around her neck and serves as an example of the damnation of the unbelievers.

The woman's position as depicted in the Quran is a definite improvement over conditions existing in pre-Islamic Arabia. Women were now able to retain and make their own decisions about the property they either brought with them into or earned during their marriage and were now permitted, for the first time, to inherit. At times, the permission laid down in Sura 4:3 to have four legitimate wives was interpreted as a concession to the four temperaments of man, and yet polygamy is by no means as widespread as is commonly believed. The above-mentioned Quranic rule to the effect that women are to be granted fair treatment has led many modernists to postulate monogamy as the ideal toward which one ought to strive. After all, even if each woman receives the same share of material goods, how

could the man possibly harbor the same feelings toward each one of multiple wives? Permission to punish one's wife for repeated disobedience is mitigated by the words of the Prophet recommending the loving treatment of women: "The best among you is he who treats his wife most kindly."

The intimate bond between man and wife is clearly defined in the frequently overlooked or more often than not falsely interpreted words of Sura 2:187: "[Women] are a raiment for you and ye are raiment for them." In religious tradition all over the world, one's garment is one's *alter ego*, that object that is most closely connected with one's personality.

The Quran mentions only one woman by her actual name. This is Mary, the virgin mother of Jesus, who is highly revered in Islam. As one tradition has it, she will be the first to enter paradise. It was for her that the dried up palm tree bore sweet dates as she clung to it during the labors of childbirth, and her newborn infant testified to her purity (Sura 19:24, 30-33). She is the silent, humble soul who would deserve special and extensive study. Although the Quran also speaks of a number of other female figures, some of them and others not mentioned in the Quran were invented by later exegetes or simply created by popular piety. These women were given names and their stories were steadily embellished and elaborated, with the result that they have come to serve as role models for women. An example of one such edifying text is Thanawi's "Paradisiacal Ornament," which didactically presents these Quranic women to the young reader as models suitable for emulation. The very first woman, naturally, is Eve, Hawwa, who, as tradition has it, was created out of Adam's rib. Even Goethe, Germany's greatest poet, was familiar with the Islamic version of this myth. His verse reproduction of this *hadith* admonishes men to treat women with indulgence. Since God took a crooked rib to create her, her resultant form could not be entirely straight. Thus, if man tries

to bend her, she will break, and if one leaves her in peace, she only becomes more crooked. The poet then asks Adam, which is to say, man, quite directly: Which is worse? In place of an answer he offers the following advice: treat women with patience and forbearance, for nobody wants a broken rib.<sup>1</sup>

Nowhere does the Quran make Eve responsible for the fall from grace, thus burdening her with having introduced original sin into the world. In fact, Islam does not even recognize the idea of original sin. But in the "Tales of the Prophets," especially in the richly elaborated versions spread by folk preachers and imaginative bards, Eve does play an important role. Her beauty is described in glowing colors: "She was as big and as comely as Adam, had 700 plaits in her hair, was adorned with chrysolite and perfumed with musk. . . . Her skin was more delicate than Adam's and purer in color, and her voice was more beautiful than his."

Tradition also tells how God addressed Adam: "My Mercy I have pulled together for you into My Servant Eve, and there is no other blessing, O Adam, that were greater than a pious wife."

Legends describing the union of the first man with the first woman include all the details that make a worldly wedding so festive, some even going so far as to have angels strew paradisiacal coins over the heads of the bridal couple. But once they succumbed to the temptations of the tiny snake that had entered the garden in the beak of a

<sup>1</sup> Behandelt die Frauen mit Nachsicht!  
Aus krummer Rippe ward sie erschaffen,  
Gott konnte sie nicht ganz grade machen.  
Willst du sie biegen, sie bricht.  
Läßt du sie ruhig, sie wird noch krümmen;  
Du guter Adam, was ist denn schlimmer?—  
Behandelt die Frauen mit Nachsicht:  
Es ist nicht gut, daß euch eine Rippe bricht.

peacock, once they had eaten of the forbidden fruit (usually represented as corn), their clothes flew off. Traditional narratives usually take advantage of this passage to emphasize Eve's frivolity. Dramatic descriptions have Eve question God as to where her guilt might lie and what her punishment would be, and God answers: "I shall make you deficient in thought and religion, and in the ability to bear witness and to inherit." These words were culled from two Quranic commandments, according to which two women are needed to bear witness instead of one man (Sura 2:282) and daughters inherit less than sons (Sura 4:11). In the same way, the next divine punishment—"Imprisoned you shall be your whole life long"—developed out of a specific understanding of seclusion that was only intensified over the course of time. According to Kisa'i, Eve was also told that no woman shall "participate in that which is best in life: the common Friday prayers" (even though this prohibition derived neither from the Quran nor from earliest practice). Nor was she supposed to greet anyone, which is another sanction for which there is no Quranic foundation. Her punishments are menstruation and pregnancy, and "a woman shall never be a prophet or a wise man." All of this only goes to show how many widespread assumptions rest not upon the words of the Quran but upon rather imaginative interpretations of the same by the believers.

Eve repented of her transgression and was forgiven. But Adam and Eve were separated after their expulsion from Paradise, and, as some legends have it, they met up again only many years later in the vicinity of Mecca. Gabriel was teaching Adam the rites of pilgrimage while he was resting on the hill of Safa. It happens that Eve was on the hill of Marwa at the time (a name imaginative exegetes derived from *mar'a*, "woman"), and they recognized one another, *ta'arafa*, on the plains of 'Arafat.

Abraham's concubine, Hagar, is also associated with pilgrimage. She ran back and forth between Marwa and Safa



seven times in order to find water for her thirsty little boy Ismail, and on the seventh trip the spring Zamzam finally bubbled up. This story eventually became the model for the pilgrim's sevenfold "running" between these two hills (which are today connected by an arcade).

Another figure in popular tradition is the daughter of Nimrud, the tyrant who had Abraham tossed onto a burning funeral pyre. The story maintains that this girl, inspired by Abraham's faith, threw herself into the fire as well and, like him, remained untouched by the flames.

Commentators have named Pharaoh's wife, the believer who rescued the baby Moses, Asiya. She soon became the model of a devout woman because she took up and rescued the future prophet despite her husband's precautionary measures. This is how she earned her place in paradise. In fact, certain circles revere her as the "perfect woman" whose beauty, along with that of Mary, Khadija, and Fatima, exceeds the comeliness of all the virgins in Paradise.

There is also another woman in the Quran, the Queen of Saba (Sheba), whom tradition knows as Bilqis. Sura 27 tells how she is first discovered by the hoopoe, *hudhud*, and then follows the call of the prophet king Solomon to accept the true faith and to become his wife. Bilqis was a former sun-worshiper who challenged Solomon with three riddles, which he naturally solved without difficulty. She was so deceived by the reflection of the glass floor in his palace (thinking that she was walking through water) that she tied up her skirts, thus baring her legs (Sura 27:43). It became immediately evident to Solomon that she, the daughter of a jinn (a supernatural spirit) and a mortal woman, had the body of a normal human being. Bilqis's heart clung to her throne, a work of wondrous beauty, and therefore Solomon ordered it miraculously removed to his own palace.

Bilqis frequently turns up in the later literature as the model of a rich, intelligent ruler; thus panegyric poems are fond of mentioning her. The Persian poet Khaqani (d. 1199)

praises both the wife and the sister of his patron, the Shirwan-shah, as Bilqis, just as he frequently uses comparisons with the great women of history, be they Maryam, the mystic Rabi'a, or Queen Zubaida. In fact, in Khaqani's poems the ladies he eulogizes appear to him to be stronger and better than the men.

Again, the court of the Beloved appears so marvelous in the *Tarjuman al-ashwaq*, the mystically interpreted love poems of the great theosophic mystic Ibn 'Arabi (d. 1240), "that Bilqis could have forgotten her throne" (Nr. XXVI, 3). The beautiful women are described as "peacocks with deadly glances and extraordinary power—one would think that each one of them were a Bilqis on her throne of pearls" (II, 2). And, as Ibn 'Arabi himself explains, he calls divine wisdom "Bilqis," for she is the child of 'theory,' which is subtle, and of 'praxis,' which is coarse, just as Bilqis was both spirit and woman since her father was one of the jinns and her mother a mortal being."

For Jami (d. 1492), though, she is the wise queen whose balanced view of good and evil women and gentle criticism of Firdausi's misogynistic verse demonstrate her sagacity. (European literature has a wonderful portrayal of her wise benevolence in Rudyard Kipling's delightful story *The Butterfly that Stamped*.)

Bilqis's throne and references to this powerful queen appear here and there in the lyrical poems as well as in the panegyrics of the Islamic world, and it is not unusual to find the wise queen portrayed in miniature paintings, either sitting on her throne or caught in the moment when the hoopoe tosses Solomon's letter onto her bed. It is all the more surprising, then, that the love between the miracle-working Solomon, who also had the gift of understanding the language of the birds, and the Yemenite queen has not been transformed into a romantic epic as have so many other traditions in Persia. This Quranic story would have been the fitting basis of a wonderful allegory about the spir-



itual power of the divinely inspired ruler and the love of the unbelieving woman who finds her way to the true faith through the guidance of his words. Perhaps the poets failed to find in this tale that tragic element so important to the other Persian-Turkish epics. As far as I know, Rumi is the only one who dwelt upon this theme in all its depth and significance. In his *Mathnawi* (M IV, 465ff.) Rumi relates how Bilqis sent gold to Solomon and how he sent her army back to her. She then set out on the long journey, during the course of which she separated herself from the world more and more every day until her entire being was transformed into that of the lover (M IV 862):

Now, as Bilqis set forth with heart and soul,  
she rued the days of old.  
She abandoned both wealth and kingdom  
as lovers forget honor and glory.  
Her gentle maidens and beautiful boys  
seemed to reek of rotting onions,  
and her gardens, palaces and ponds  
appeared as cinders to the eye of love.  
When love overwhelms a person's being,  
all one previously prized suddenly seems odious.  
The emerald is no better than a leek.  
Love's ardor teaches: There is no God but He—  
and He alone! O guardian, 'No God but He'—  
the power of this truth can transform the bright  
moon to a black pot before your very eyes.

In this transformation, Bilqis is rather reminiscent of Zulaikha, Potiphar's wife in the Old Testament. In the Islamic tradition, Zulaikha turns into a love-obsessed woman willing to do anything to attain her beloved Yusuf, the personification of beauty, whom she passionately desires:

Love is like an ocean  
upon which the heavens are mere foam,  
aroused, like Zulaikha, in her love for Yusuf

is the way Rumi put it, the poet who is the best interpreter of this story.

The twelfth Sura of the Quran, whose own words characterize this tale as "the story most beautiful," tells of Yusuf's life, his separation from his father Jacob, the treachery of his brothers; it relates how he was thrown into the pit and then sold to Egypt, how the wife of his master fell in love with him and, reprimanded by all because of her passion, invites all her girlfriends to visit her. When Yusuf enters, they are so enraptured by his appearance that they unconsciously cut their own fingers while peeling the citrus fruits they were preparing. Then follows Yusuf's role in prison, his interpretation of dreams and the high position he ultimately attains, which in turn allows him to sell grain to his brothers during the famine in Canaan. The story ends when Jacob, blinded by weeping for his lost son, is restored to sight by the scent of Yusuf's shirt.

Subsequent literary developments appropriated several scenes from this Quranic narrative and embellished them to the extent that Zulaikha, initially a rather unimportant figure, eventually became the focus of attention.

The Quranic commentators were naturally kindly disposed toward this theme, and it was primarily such mystics as 'Abdullah-i Ansari of Herat (d. 1089) and his follower Maibudhi who dedicated long and profound explications to the Yusuf story. The theme was probably well known to Iran's poets very early on, even if the tale "Yusuf and Zulaikha," formerly attributed to Firdausi (d. 1020), is no longer recognized as his work, regardless of how diligently nineteenth-century scholars tried to prove its authenticity.

As Hermann Ethé demonstrates, already before the turn of the first millennium Abu 'l-Mu'ayyad al-Balkhi composed an epic about these famous Quranic lovers, and in the course of the centuries innumerable recountings of the material followed, primarily in the eastern Islamic world: Shaukat Bukhari, Am'aq Bukhari, Nazim-i Harawi, Ruk-

nuddin Harawi are all named in Ethé's list, and the poets in the Indian subcontinent enthusiastically appropriated the theme after Jami of Herat had given it its classic form in a poem that was rendered into German as early as 1824 by Vincenz von Rosenzweig-Schwannau. Mir Ma'sum Nami, the historian and calligrapher from Sind who was associated with Akbar's court, is only one of the many who reworked the theme into Persian verses. Prose works were also written in the Indo-Persian regions, and every one of these versions ends with the happy and detailed depiction of the marriage of Yusuf and Zulaikha. There is a Kashmiri version of the epic, and in Bengali Muhammad Saghir's (d. 1501) rendition of *Yusuf Jalikha* dates back to the fifteenth century. In the Dakhni-Urdu literature of the southern Indian courts several poetic elaborations of the story appear in the seventeenth century, including the one by Malik Khushnud, the court bard of Muhammad 'Adil Shah of Bijapur. In Hashim's poem toward the end of the seventeenth century Zulaikha speaks *rekhti*, the typical woman's idiom of Urdu, and a poet from Gujarat, Mir 'Ali Amin "draped Zulaikha with the robes of respectable ladies," as one critic writes.

Just how many different versions of the Yusuf-Zulaikha-motif appeared in later years in the eastern regions is hard to determine. Naturally the theme was taken up also in Ottoman Turkey, where Hamdi (d. 1503), the son of the mystical leader Aq Shamsuddin, the religious leader of Sultan Mehmet the Conqueror, created one of the most moving renditions of the story. In it, "Zulaikha's Lament" is particularly touching:

Ever since, when on the day of affirmation  
[i.e., the Primordial Covenant (Sura 7:172)]  
love sowed the seed of sorrow,  
love let me grow, nourished by the water of pain.  
Then, when pain had threshed out my grains,

love suddenly tossed the harvest to the wind.  
Ever since my heart first became acquainted with  
the grief of my Friend,  
love estranged all the friends I held dear from me.  
Health too bade me farewell, ever since  
love stretched out its hand of reprimand  
to welcome me.  
My eyes have lost all trace of sleep, they overflow  
with tears:  
I do not know the destination  
love has in store for me.

Certain themes from the story of Yusuf and Zulaikha are repeatedly mentioned and transformed in the epics as well as in countless other references in lyric poetry. One such theme is the auction during which the beautiful slave was supposed to be sold. As everybody gathers around and prepares to bid, a poor old woman with the same intention joins the crowd (see below, p. 70f.). She represents the personification of noble striving which is praiseworthy in itself, even if it fails to attain its goal.

Zulaikha does everything she can think of to seduce Yusuf: she has her palace adorned with sensuous pictures so that Yusuf should see himself and Zulaikha enveloped in the joys of love wherever his eyes may wander. As might be expected, the most detailed depiction of this scene is found in Jami's epic. It is interesting to remember that, more than four hundred years before him, one of the Ghaznavid rulers, Sultan Mas'ud (d. 1089), ordered a pleasure palace in Jami's hometown of Herat to be decorated with extremely sensuous wall paintings. One almost has the feeling that the memory of such a palace might have somehow subconsciously lived on in Herat. Jami's description understandably inspired the miniature painters of the sixteenth century, for they frequently portrayed a multi-storied palace with the beautiful Yusuf trying to flee over its

steep and convoluted steps. Zulaikha appears in these pictures as an attractive woman draped in red robes. (Red was the color of the bridal gown, but it can also be interpreted more generally as an indication of ardent love.) Yusuf, on the other hand, is frequently shown wearing the green garments of the saints, the prophets, and the inhabitants of Paradise.

An interesting aspect of the seduction scene is Zulaikha's attitude toward the idol she keeps in her room; after all, she is still an unbeliever practicing a false religion. She covers the icon to hide her seductive machinations from its view. This scene has to be very old, for the mystic Hujwiri (d. ca. 1071) wrote in his introduction to the *Sufi Path*: "All human beings ought to learn from Zulaikha how to observe good manners in contemplating the object of their adoration, for when she was alone with Joseph and besought him to consent to her wishes, she first covered up the face of her idol in order that it might not witness her want of propriety."<sup>2</sup>

Jami describes the same scene and alludes to it again in another epic poem called *Subhat al-abrar*. Here Yusuf tells her that he is as ashamed before God, the All-Seeing One, as she is before her idol, and he quickly takes his leave.

Jami takes up the theme of the idol once again toward the end of his great poem when the aged Zulaikha begins to doubt that Yusuf will ever turn to her. She smashes the ineffectual statue and, after having thus freed herself from the "idols," and now with the help of the true God, she miraculously attains her goal and is eventually united with her beloved.

This is a fine way to convert to the true faith, but an early mystic, Yusuf ibn Husain ar-Razi (d. 916), has a more profound view: "When she cast desire away, God gave her

\*<sup>2</sup> Ali ibn 'Usman Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-mahjub: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sufism*, Written by Ali ibn Uthman al-Hujwiri, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London/Leiden, 1911), p. 335.

beauty and youth back to her. It is a law that when the lover advances, the beloved retires. If the lover is satisfied with love alone, then the beloved draws nigh."<sup>3</sup>

Zulaikha thus becomes the woman-soul who lives out her life in harsh repentance and endless longing. "If you are not Zulaikha and are not ground in the mill of love, do not waste time talking of Yusuf of Canaan" is the warning Sana'i, the mystical poet of Ghazna (d. 1131), gives. To his way of thinking, only the one acquainted with the pain of loving Yusuf has any right to speak of love. The poets know that "love tore Zulaikha from the veil of chastity," as Hafiz put it, and she became the symbol for all who suffer the pangs of unrequitable love and longing. She thus became the courageous, strong heroine willing to bear anything for the sake of her Beloved.

"People always looked at Yusuf's torn garment— / But who saw Zulaikha's torn and broken heart?" asked the Indian poet Azad Bilgrami toward the middle of the eighteenth century. The poets describe the woman, once so beautiful, aging in misery and sitting in desperation at side of the road, hoping to catch a glimpse of Yusuf. He, for his part, wants nothing to do with her, as 'Attar tells in his *Musibatnama*:

When Jacob set out to visit his son,  
and left Canaan to go to Egypt,  
the Egyptians adorned their land  
from one end to the other.  
When Zulaikha learned of this,  
she threw herself upon the ground, completely  
overcome.  
She covered her head with a veil  
and crouched humbly by the side of the road.  
As it happened, Yusuf had to pass this spot;  
he saw the sad and afflicted one.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 136.



High on his horse, with whip in hand,  
he struck the woman so morbidly in love  
with him.

A sigh rang out from the depths of her heart,  
whose ardor the cane but whipped to flame,  
and, as the fire grew ever stronger,  
Yusuf, most miserable, dropped his whip.  
Zulaikha said: "O thou with faith so pure—  
is it too much for you, that you can't bear it!  
This flame has sprung from out my heart  
and you can't hold it in your hand?  
The flame that has filled me for years—  
can you not hold it for even a moment?  
You, of all Believers the First—and I a woman!  
Is that how you show your fidelity?"

Like Jacob, Zulaikha, too, turns blind from constant weeping and yearns only for a passing scent of Yusuf's presence. Hujwiri says: "Since Zulaikha was ready to die on account of her excessive love for Yusuf, her eyes were not opened until she was united with him."

Only the thought of Yusuf kept her alive; she thinks exclusively of his name just as the soul should constantly think of the Divine Beloved. Thus Ibn 'Arabi relates in his *Futuhat al-makkiyya* (II 375): "It was said that Zulaikha was once wounded by an arrow. As her blood dripped to the ground, it traced out the name 'Yusuf, Yusuf' wherever it landed; because she so constantly repeated this name, it flowed like blood in her veins."

This image had already been employed in early Sufism, where it is told that a Sufi's blood kept on writing the word "Allah" in the dust after he had been accidentally injured. Ibn 'Arabi, however, used the example of Zulaikha when mentioning how the blood of the martyr-mystic Hallaj also wrote the name of God.

After this period of yearning and desperation, Zulaikha's unshakable fidelity is finally rewarded. "Be patient like

Zulaikha," Sana'i never tires of teaching his readers, for he knows that the mere proximity of the beloved has rejuvenating powers: "When the torments of your lower soul and the weakness of your body have rendered you old and shabby, rejuvenate your soul, like Zulaikha, by yearning for your Friend."

'Attar, who belongs to the next generation of mystical poets, describes this rejuvenation in a dramatically moving scene in his *Ilaht-nama*:<sup>4</sup>

One day Joseph the Pure was walking along when he  
saw Zulaikha seated on the ground;

The world hidden from her eyes, but then she had  
averted her eyes from the world;

Afflicted with sickness and poverty, beside herself in a  
hundred different ways;

Every moment suffering more than a hundred griefs,  
more concerned about Joseph than Joseph himself;

Sitting on the road as though hoping that she might  
receive some of the dust raised by his feet;

That perhaps some dust might rise from the road traveled  
by that king-like one.

When Joseph saw her he said: "O God, what wilt Thou  
with this blind and decrepit old woman?"

Why doest Thou not cause her to disappear seeing that  
she sought to bring disgrace on Thy prophet?"

Gabriel descended and said: "We shall not remove her,  
For she has within her a whole world of love for him  
whom We love.

Since her love for thee is unceasing I too love her for thy  
sake.

Who told thee to seek the death of the rose in the garden  
and to wish for the destruction of the friends of Our  
friends?

Though for a lifetime I have driven her to despair yet I

<sup>4</sup> Quoted from *The Ilaht-nama or Book of God of Farid al-Din 'Attar*, translated from the Persian by John Andrew Boyle, with foreword by Annemarie Schimmel (Manchester, 1976), p. 297f.

will now make her young again for thee.

She has given thee her own precious soul; if I now bless her let her be to thee as thy soul.

Since she is filled with tenderness for Our Joseph, who would think in hatred of taking her life?

If she claims to love such a king as thou, her weeping eyes bear witness to her love."—

Since this lover has her witnesses with her her glory increases more and more every day.

Thus the loving Zulaikha comes to personify the human soul, the *nafs*, which, as the Quran says in Sura Yusuf, "incites to evil, *ammara bi's-su*," but which is purified through constant inner struggle and suffering and can finally return to her Lord as "the soul at peace." The scent of Yusuf's shirt touches her and reveals his beauty, for scent, the breath of the Merciful One, brings news of the beloved, and the proximity of the beloved rejuvenates the woman ravaged by grief. Jami and the poets who followed his model describe in great detail the wedding of the couple, now finally united. Zulaikha, once betrothed to an impotent husband, is still a virgin, and now the loving Yusuf tears the garment from his chaste bride as she had once torn his shirt from him. All of this, though, has little to do with the profoundly mystical content of the story, which is itself a perfect illustration of the primordial interplay of Beauty and Love as Jami so aptly expressed it in the introduction to his epic poem.

## — 4. Woman or "Man of God": The Education of the Soul (*nafs*) —

ZULAIKHA THE SEDUCTRESS—that's the way she appears in the Quran—and for those who lived in ascetic fear of the feminine it must have been very gratifying that exactly the Sura Yusuf, which denounces such seductive arts, talks of the *nafs*, the "soul," in terms of its being *ammara bi's-su*, "inciting to evil" (Sura 12:53). Wasn't the grammatical gender of the very word *nafs* feminine? Couldn't it therefore serve as a symbol for the woman whose sensuality always thwarts the religious inclinations, the high-minded strivings of the rationally oriented man? Since she possesses more animalistic traits than does the man, she constantly tries to seduce him through her sexual wiles.

Every culture prefers boys to girls: familiar to all are the rites with which the birth of a boy is greeted with joy whereas the birth of a girl is noted with disappointment. This explains why some Muslim saints have been credited with miracles transforming newborn girls into boys. . . . The fear of women, who, as the Prophet is supposed to have said, "can overcome the rational ones," is reflected in numerous sayings and tales from the early years of Islam. "The woman is evil through and through, and the most evil thing about her is that she is absolutely necessary!" This remark has been attributed to 'Alī ibn Abī Talīb, who, as the husband of the Prophet's daughter Fatima, actually

included  
not say  
this!!